THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

'Monstrous perversions and lying inventions'

Citation for published version:
Murray, H-R 2019, 'Monstrous perversions and lying inventions': Moses Roper's resistance to the British imagination of slavery and abolition. in A Dix & P Templeton (eds), *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation.* Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429342684

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.4324/9780429342684

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter

Publisher Rights Statement:
This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in : Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation, on 12 November 2019, available online: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9780429342684

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 06. May. 2023

HANNAH-ROSE MURRAY

"Monstrous Perversions and Lying Inventions": Moses Roper's Performative Resistance to the Transatlantic Imagination of American Slavery

In the 2013 web series "Ask A Slave," actress Azie Mira Dungey recorded questions she received from white audience members when she interpreted the life of an enslaved individual at Virginia's Mount Vernon Historic Site. Grouping these questions under specific themes such as resistance and fugitivity, abolition, labour, and the enslaved family, Dungey answers the queries while portraying an enslaved woman named Lizzie Mae. In the third episode, a white, male character refuses to believe her life is as difficult as she makes out, commenting that "if you look at it honestly, slavery wasn't that bad … slavery is a good industrious life, where you got room and board for your work." Lizzie Mae meets this comment with a round of expletives and a witty rebuttal (she built her own house, for example). A line of text passes along the screen, reading "you just can't make this stuff up" (Dungey 2013). Three years later, in an identical line of argument, Fox News journalist Bill O'Reilly stated that slavery was not a brutal institution, especially for those who built the White House since they "were well-fed and had decent lodgings." Reilly's statement was in response to First Lady Michelle Obama's observation that she woke "up every morning in a house that was built by slaves" (Frenck 2016). In both circumstances, the denial of slavery's brutality not only deforms its reality but also subsequently discredits black testimony and silences the black voice. Whether in a public heritage space or within the media, the white men in this scenario sought to discredit centuries-old evidence from formerly enslaved people and their descendants.

White attempts at repudiating the violent nature of American slavery are nothing new, however. Nineteenth-century abolitionists challenged white pro-slavery defenders who maintained that enslaved populations were content in their condition. Black activists like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, William and Ellen Craft, and Moses Roper refused to accept such racist arguments, and worked tirelessly to convince the transatlantic public that slavery was a cruel and bloody system. However, they were acutely aware that their authenticity and their testimony itself were heavily scrutinized by white abolitionists and their audiences alike. These doubts were rooted in white supremacy, and black men and women often had to make compromises in their written work and public performances to allow for such disbelief. For example, during a lecture series in Nottingham, England in 1851, William Wells Brown displayed his panorama of slavery (a moving painting on canvas thousands of feet long) across three consecutive nights. In the first meeting, he assured audiences that "the utmost care had been taken not to misrepresent or exaggerate the subject in the least degree" and as a result "several sketches had not been transferred to canvas lest they might be deemed liable to such a charge" (*Nottingham Review* 1851, 3). Brown removed scenes (probably of hideous torture and cruelty) to reduce any criticism he would potentially receive. The public awareness of slavery coexisted with racial stereotypes and pro-slavery arguments that decreed enslaved populations were content. Brown challenged these narratives but found it difficult to convince his white audiences of the true extent of slavery's barbarity. John Andrew Jackson, another formerly enslaved individual who toured Britain, summarized this complexity. After the phenomenal success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Jackson wrote that as a white woman Stowe had no concept of what slavery was truly like, writing she "dared only allude to some of the hellish works of

slavery" since it "was too foul to sully her pen." Specifically referring to violence and torture, Jackson declared that the "half has not yet been told" (Jackson 1862, iii).

Unfortunately for formerly enslaved African American Moses Roper, his attempts to tell the other "half" of the story received mixed success in the British Isles. On the one hand, a strong antislavery sentiment remained in British society since the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and of slavery in the British Empire in 1838, and British people flocked to hear Roper's testimony against slavery. He sold thousands of copies of his own slave narrative and travelled extensively around the country from Penzance to Aberdeen. The desire to hear a formerly enslaved individual speak no doubt co-existed with a fetishistic desire to view the black body as a site of pain and torture, but there were some who rejected Roper's stories altogether. In certain locations, he was branded a liar for deliberately perverting the nature of the "peculiar institution" – his descriptions of repeated beatings, floggings and torture were apparently exaggerated, as they seemed so unbelievable. Like their twenty-first-century counterparts, newspaper correspondents tapped into white supremacist narratives to threaten Roper's reputation, jeopardize his future success and ultimately discredit his testimony. As Marcus Wood states, "writings by ex-slaves and slave narratives from their first appearance were created and read against a perpetual backdrop of white suspicion, patronization and possessive fantasy" (2002, 11). The element of white suspicion is key to understanding the racial dynamics and politics of abolitionism, as well as white responses to African Americans in general. Roper's speeches were often met with heavy suspicion and sometimes vitriolic loathing; extending across national lines, newspaper correspondents' commentaries and rejection of Roper's testimony revealed their investment in white supremacy and their desire to erode and deny black testimony. However, in spite of rising disbelief

and personal attacks, Roper risked his success and reputation on the British stage by boldly refusing to compromise on his descriptions of the brutality of slavery, since this denial threatened his identity and was an insult to everything he had endured.

The first section of this chapter will explore the complexities surrounding the representation of slavery, and how white activists too often focused on black corporeal pain. By recounting the violent acts of white slaveowners one after the other, white abolitionists hoped to educate audiences and reinforce the belief that slavery was a sin. Unfortunately, this objectified black bodies and sometimes made them voiceless victims of slavery's violence, rather than self-reflexive agents of survival. The next section will explore Roper's interaction with Victorian print culture, and how his radicalism hindered his success on the Victorian stage. I will analyse three newspaper articles from England, Ireland and Wales to explain how Roper's bold denunciation of slavery invited criticism along white supremacist lines: for these white correspondents, together with some of their audiences, slavery was a brutal institution, but to trust Roper's word alone was folly. The violence Roper described was simply *too* brutal to be believed. Lastly, I will explore Roper's performative reactions to such press criticism and slander. Despite relaying stories of torture and mutilation, he presented himself as the subject, rather than the object, of his own narrative and I will discuss three specific performative techniques Roper employed to challenge such ferocious criticism. The first centres on his *Narrative*, which he used not only as a way to make a living but also as an object to challenge white sceptics when he handed out copies to unsuspecting strangers. The second involved a bold refusal to edit his testimony on stage. While some visiting African Americans compromised or edited their speeches to gain popularity, Roper did not yield to Victorian sensibilities. The third centres upon the threat of violence: on

several occasions after Roper had relayed accounts of his torture, white men in Roper's audience expressed loud disbelief that a man could survive such vicious whipping, only for Roper to quickly reply he would take the individual outside and show him in practice. The ephemeral nature of performance, together with the difficulty of understanding black performance through the white lens of Victorian print culture, means it is unclear whether Roper made these comments in jest.

Regardless, Roper never compromised on his descriptions of slavery's violence. His commitment to the truth revealed itself both publicly and privately. During a lecture in Birmingham in 1838, for example, his strong words against Southern Christianity caused some concern amongst local religious ministers. Reverend Peter Sibree wrote in his diary that he had advised Roper to tone down his language regarding slaveholders and Christianity, but received in reply: "I shall tell the truth" (Walker 2011, 102-106).

"Well-authenticated facts": slavery, abolition and the problem of representation

During the nineteenth century, scores of black activists travelled to England, Ireland, Scotland and even parts of rural Wales to educate the British public on slavery. Many individuals sought temporary reprieve from American soil, others permanent; some raised money to free themselves or enslaved family members, and others sought work with varying degrees of success. Whatever their reasons for visiting, black abolitionists exhibited whips and chains (and sometimes even their scars); read aloud runaway slave advertisements from Southern newspapers; created visual panoramas on thousands of feet of canvas; and used fiery rhetoric to tell their stories (Fisch 2000, 1-10). While many remain unknown to us or await recovery, famous individuals such as Frederick Douglass made a strong impact on the British and Irish landscape. He

used his brilliant oratorical ability to electrify audiences, causing national controversies that were discussed in newspapers around the globe.

However, black activists often ran the risk of being fetishized by white audiences. Transatlantic audiences were obsessed with the exhibited scarred black body. As Cassandra Jackson notes, the "imagery of the wounded black male body was used to manage and maintain complex systems of racial and gendered cultural hierarchies" (2011, 3). In a "body already considered dangerous, volatile, and forbidden, the wound makes the body available to observation and desire" (4-5). The infamous image of Gordon, a former slave whose back was scarred with the lash, testifies to this obsession: white abolitionists printed and distributed the image on both sides of the Atlantic to illustrate the barbarity of slavery as well as focusing on Gordon as "an object of white desire" (12). Portrayed in popular culture as scarred, subservient or passive figures, black activists like Douglass transformed their bodies into sites of protest instead. Layering such protests upon their physical selves, they became self-reflexive agents in order to disrupt racial norms and protest against attempts to render black voices unheard. These activists were architects of subversion, challenging misconceptions of slavery and white obsession with the black corporeal. They played on preconceived notions and spoke eloquently and powerfully to win their audience to the cause of abolition.

Performance alone was not enough for black abolitionists to conduct a successful transatlantic mission and maximize their antislavery activism. White networks friendly to the abolitionist cause were essential in orchestrating lectures. Led by William Lloyd Garrison, the rise of radical abolitionism in the 1830s ensured that by the 1840s there was a growing transatlantic network of like-minded individuals who were prepared to offer help, support and even their homes to black activists who

travelled across Britain to lecture against slavery (Ripley 1985, 6-18; Blackett 1983). Most successful black activist tours took place between 1845 and 1865, partly because abolitionist networks became more tangible in this period. Historians tend to focus on men and women such as Douglass, William Wells Brown, William and Ellen Craft and Henry "Box" Brown who arrived in the mid-1840s and 1850s. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 and the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* two years later inspired further fascination with American slavery and a ready market for fugitive slave stories in Britain. Audrey Fisch states that Victorians were keen to hear these stories against a backdrop of Britain as the moral saviour and a place where enslaved Africans could walk free (1-10; 54).

White abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic used numerous methods to convince others of slavery's sins, urging their audiences in particular to listen to black testimony. They also employed sentimental narratives, focusing on black suffering and family separation, urging supporters to feel what the enslaved suffered (Levecq 2008, 190; 208-230; Nathans 2009, 73; 189). Focusing on black pain was a popular trope, and Richard Bell argues that "so voyeuristic, fetishistic and ubiquitous were these descriptions that southerners quickly complained that abolitionists were exaggerating the extent of slavery's cruelties" (2004, 534) In response, antislavery activists "paraded a procession of suffering slaves – a majority of whom were female" and described how "wounded women knelt in submission, beckoning good Christian readers to rush in and rescue them" (534). In doing so, abolitionists distributed and sold images of tortured enslaved individuals and their scars to highlight the cruelty of Southern slavery, and testimony of the formerly enslaved was reframed to fit white antislavery narrative constructions (DeLombard 2001, 245-256; 270).

Depicting slavery was thus a complex abolitionist aim, and conflicts arose as to the best means of representation (Wood 2000, 8; 81). As Frances Smith Foster argues, formerly enslaved individuals had to "convince [their] readers to accept the validity of [their] knowledge and conclusions, which in many instances profoundly contradicted their own" (1979, 9). If an abolitionist "was to obtain their sympathy and aid, [they] had to do this in a manner which did not threaten or embarrass" them, and they had to convince white audiences of their literary ability as well as the truth of their story (9). Within the text itself, black writers had to carefully relay their own experience of slavery in conjunction with other slave narratives and white abolitionist texts so as not to exceed the limits of white audience understanding. Famously, Garrison's followers told Douglass to "just give us the facts … we will take care of the philosophy" (Andrews 1986, 107). Abolitionists wanted formerly enslaved individuals to recount their own experience, but nothing more, so they could reframe and edit their testimony to fit within white narratives. (Andrews 1986, 6-26). The abolitionist politics surrounding authenticity reveal the racial undercurrents between white and black, and how a white abolitionist framework confined and constricted black voices.

In an early attempt to confront the dilemma of depicting slavery, white abolitionist Theodore Weld published *Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* in 1839. Weld combined accounts from former slaveholders, abolitionists, newspaper articles and letters to refute pro-slavery arguments that it was a benevolent institution. Weld described how "great care should be observed in the statement of facts" and only "well-weighted testimony and well-authenticated facts" would be published (1839, iv). In an omission obvious to contemporary eyes, enslaved testimony was neglected

in favour of white testimony, which was used to convince mainly white audiences that slavery was a sin.

Weld's success epitomized the growing fascination with sentimentalism and torture iconography. Evidence of such eroticization of black bodily pain can be found in reports of black activist speeches in the British Isles. During a meeting in Sheffield in 1838, a local correspondent described the display of torture weapons thus:

> It is called "the negro flapper," and is certainly the most tremendous weapon of the whip kind that we ever saw. The stock is about three feet long; the handle, being weighted with lead, and the end made elastic with whalebone. The lash appeared to be about ten feet long, very heavy, to correspond with the stock. This was the ordinary instrument of correction in the field, when the negroes had their clothes on. It required great tact to use it. Skill in its use was the great recommendation for an overseer. (*The Sheffield Independent and Yorkshire and Derbyshire Advertiser* 1838, 3).

Sadiya Hartman in particular has explored the perils of describing torture and subsequent empathy towards suffering. Victorian audiences, she notes, were interested in the "spectacle of punishment" and the violence that represented the heart of slavery (1997, 20). By identifying with black pain, white audiences attempted to identify with the enslaved in fetishistic ways (10-25). In the newspaper article above, the correspondent appears completely transfixed by the operations of such weapons of torture, even in slight admiration of the way it "required great tact to use it." Instead of its portrayal as an instrument of great pain, it is a "tremendous weapon" that is eagerly described in great detail. Similarly, in a meeting in May 1846, Douglass described scenes of slavery's brutality to a Scottish audience, and the local correspondent wrote that some enslaved people "had pieces of chains on their legs, attached to which were heavy bars of iron to prevent them from escaping, while others (and these were chiefly women) were decorated with iron collars" (*Caledonian*

Mercury 1846, 3). While the correspondent describes the tortures as "horrible," he also uses the descriptive term "decorated" to refer to enslaved people wearing iron collars. Although the article implies it was not the enslaved people's choice to wear such cruelties, it belies a curious and pornographic fascination with these "chains" and "collars," as though they adorned enslaved bodies like jewellery. As Marcus Wood summarizes, "the spectacle of extreme physical suffering is the ultimate test for the capacities of the sentimental imagination, but also shades very easily into pornographic fantasy" (2002, 103). The "fetishized slave body as a site of torture was absorbed into the conventions of pornographic martyrology," and white abolitionists such as Thomas Clarkson engaged heavily in this trope in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Wood 2002, 409). Clarkson's display of torture implements was accompanied by "a Sadean delight in the efficiency of the equipment and absolute power of the master to use it with brutal detachment" (413). Unfortunately for black activists like Moses Roper, it was precisely this investment in a white supremacist narrative which led to an inability to grasp slavery's true nature. Disgusted at what they deemed to be lies, numerous correspondents attempted to discredit Roper's reputation and silence his fraudulent testimony.

"We have the evidence of better authorities than Moses Roper:" Victorian print culture and enslaved testimony

Born enslaved in 1815 in Caswell County, North Carolina, Roper suffered from extreme violence and torture as a result of his repeated escape attempts. After his final escape to New York, he settled in Northern cities including Boston to ensure he was not recaptured. He eventually regarded America as unsafe for him, and set sail for Britain in 1835, the first of at least three trips (he returned in 1846 and 1854, when he

stayed for several years at a time). He lectured around Britain in hundreds of churches and town halls and in 1837 published his book, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Roper 1838; Ripley 1985). One of the key themes within the autobiography focused on the suffering he had endured while enslaved. He recounted stories of failed escape attempts and the subsequent punishments he received: on one occasion, he was whipped one hundred times, and had burning tar poured on his face. According to Roper, these "excruciating" punishments ended before any "great injury" (1838, 49), but, nevertheless, the explicit and detailed language he used to describe this torture inevitably shocked his Victorian middle-class audience. In 1846, *The Aberdeen Journal* reported that Roper's *Narrative* "unfolds many a scene of barbarity of the most revolting description" and his attempted escapes from slavery and "recaptures were invariably followed by the severest punishment" (*The Aberdeen Journal* 1846, 3).

Before embarking on the lecture circuit, Roper experienced accusations of falsehood in 1836. In a letter to the *Patriot'*s editor, Roper wrote that a Reverend R. J. Breckinridge questioned "the accuracy of a statement made by me in reference to the burning alive of a slave in the United States." Roper assured both Breckinridge and the editor that the story was true and proceeded to relate the "particulars of that melancholy event." An enslaved man named George was chained to a tree, "the chain having been passed round his neck, arms, and legs, to make him secure." A large amount "of tar and turpentine was then poured over his head […] and the miserable man perished in the flames." Long after the lynching and as a warning to the local enslaved population, "not only was the stump of the tree to which the slave George had been fastened to be seen, but some of his burnt bones." Roper wrote that he was "ready to attest in the most solemn" manner if necessary, and he stated that "though I

have been a slave, I trust my evidence will be received on matters of fact which have come within the range of my own observation" (qtd. in *The Bradford Observer* 1836, 6).

Unfortunately for Roper, white audiences were predisposed to doubt the words of a black slave narrator who possessed few respectful connections to support his story. Dwight A. McBride argues that while audiences were fascinated by slave narrators who were "real" witnesses to slavery's atrocities, the success of that testimony depended on a narrative which rested on the familiar. He summarizes that abolitionism "produced the occasion for bearing witness, but to an experience that had already been theorized and prophesised […] before the slave ever speaks, we know the slave, we know what his or her experience is, and we know how to read that experience" (McBride 2001, 4-5). Roper was uninterested in adhering to stories that thrived in a white racist schema, and he challenged his audiences' perceptions of slavery by retelling violent stories from his personal experience.

After the incident with Breckinridge, doubts about Roper's character continued to be expressed in three of the countries where he travelled: Ireland, Wales, and England. The first article appeared in the *Wexford Conservative* in 1838, as one correspondent attacked what he saw as Roper's unconscionable twisting of facts regarding the Methodist Church. Beginning his article with a reference to the Bible – "The Truth shall make you free" – the correspondent wanted to alert the audience from the outset that individuals such as Roper who did not speak the truth would always remain slaves (*Wexford Conservative* 1838, 3). Astounded that Roper had "obtained permission to exhibit himself as an emancipated slave," the correspondent extended his criticisms along national and religious lines by claiming his fellow Irishmen were suffering far worse than enslaved Africans. The evil of Catholicism, or

"popery," was another form of slavery, as "what can the slavery of the body be, in comparison with the slavery of the mind?" Catholics had introduced slavery to the New World and perpetuated endless torture amongst the native peoples. The Methodists, on the other hand, had proven their philanthropy by sending missionaries to the enslaved populations, who "have been bitterly persecuted by the slaveholders." The correspondent asked rhetorically, who would believe Roper – "an unknown individual" – over the course of history?

> Nobody knows any thing about him. He is going through the country holding meetings, at which he speaks with considerable fluency for two or three hours, though he says, he received only eighteen months of English Education! What a likely story this! that a negro, in so short a time, could learn the English language so perfectly, as to be able to keep up the attention of his auditory for two or three hours!! He appears to have read the History of the Inquisition in that time, and to have committed nearly the whole of it to memory; for, there never was a mode for the torture of heretics, used by the *holy fathers,* with which he is not acquainted […] Thus like all other artful and self-interesting agitators, he lays hold on the prejudices of some and the credulity of others, to work out his plan of *ways and means,* through the country. (*Wexford Conservative* 1838)

The correspondent completely denies Roper's identity as a formerly enslaved individual. He scarcely contains his disbelief that such a liar would place himself before an unsuspecting and philanthropic Irish public. The first obvious clue to Roper's deception was his supposed lack of education. It was impossible for a black man to speak to a crowded audience for more than two hours if he had acquired a full education only in the last two or three years. Roper's trauma is ridiculed, with the torture he described merely something he memorized from reading about the cruelties enacted during the Spanish Inquisition in the fifteenth century. His accounts of slave tortures – particularly those committed by so-called religious men – were so horrid

they are deemed unbelievable. Most shockingly of all, Roper criticized the Methodists at the expense of Catholic slaveholders, and not only had he arranged a lecture tour that was based on lies, but his testimony relied on hoodwinking Quakers in particular "into the belief of such palpably incredible descriptions of cruelty" (*Wexford Conservative* 1838).

In 1839, a year after the Wexford controversy, Roper was once again accused of being an imposter while lecturing along the south coast of England. His lack of connections inevitably ensured the widespread denunciation of his stories, and the correspondent for the dominant southern newspaper, the *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*, was particularly venomous in his comments. The reporter mocked audience gullibility and declared they were "being imposed on" by Roper: the British people knew about "the horrors of slavery and its dreadful extent," but his display of whips and chains was so implausible it could not be true (*Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian* 1839, 2). Although the correspondent had not heard Roper speak at this point, he based his account on hearsay and wrote:

> We have heard of a cat having nine lives, but Sambo must have had at least 18, and his fingers and toes, doubtless, possess the re-producing powers of the crab […] It seems we [were] wrong in imagining the various instruments of torture he exhibits were brought by him from America – as Sambo had them forged for his own especial use at Birmingham […] Slavery is the foul blot which obscures and defiles all that is great and good among men who achieve freedom for themselves, but denied it to their fellow men. But it is not the monstrous perversions and lying inventions of Moses Roper that will either enlist English sympathies or effect a change in the American character. (*Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian* 1839, 2)

According to this correspondent, Roper was an "anti-truth telling-and-unbelieving nigger" because no one could survive such brutality. If an individual faced such

violence, death was inevitable, and the correspondent mocked Roper for seemingly possessing healing powers or the ability to resurrect himself from the dead. Similarly, Roper's decision to make whips and chains in Birmingham was added testimony of his lies. His stories, like those instruments of torture, were fabricated and exaggerated in England. While slavery was a sin, men like Roper hindered the abolitionist cause and played to the gullibility of white men and women, who naturally would be sympathetic without question to a formerly enslaved individual. Indeed, the paper mentions white author Harriet Martineau as a "better authority" because white abolitionists were deemed more truthful. The repeated use of "Sambo" was a racial epithet to discredit Roper even further and cast him aside as an ignorant and lying fool, a stereotype that white Victorians were familiar with. Since Victorian society was codified and framed by whiteness, Roper's bold language offended Victorian sensibilities. As a result, his narrative was spurned and ridiculed for crossing the boundaries of authenticity.

Two years later in 1841, a correspondent for *The North Wales Chronicle* (the only newspaper to be printed in the region at the time) was similarly apoplectic with rage that Roper could dupe the public so easily. He lamented that people were willing to accept his story purely because he was "endowed with the gift of the gab" and appeared to be "an oracle of truth and wisdom" (*North Wales Chronicle* 1841, 3). Such gullibility reached its height during Roper's lecture when he exhibited the "negro paddle." Roper had explained how the mechanism of torture worked, as the paddle contained small holes that created weals which were then broken open on each continuing stroke. Despite witnessing Roper's description and the object itself, the correspondent dismissed his testimony and the existence of the paddle:

> Of a verity, negro flesh must be soft as putty to rise in wheales in the manner here represented, soft as the heads which listen and give credence to such stories. Only think of American ladies' cow-hiding their domestic slaves! O Moses! Slavery, in its mildest form, is insupportable enough, but common sense forbids a belief in the atrocities with which it is here invested. (*North Wales Chronicle* 1841, 3)

In a vehemently racist tirade, the correspondent repudiates Roper's testimony in both printed and oral form. He equates the torture of enslaved individuals with gullible men who believe such stories: in one sentence alone, he betrays the white supremacist schema by which the voices and experiences of black individuals were deliberately suppressed and twisted for the benefit of white narratives. As we have seen with the previous extracts, Roper's stories of torture and violence were too unbelievable, particularly his account of white American women whipping the enslaved. Roper was evidently moving beyond the limits of Victorian understanding of slavery, as this level of brutality could not exist. In other words, there were few white testimonials supporting his account, and the bodily scars which Roper carried were fake, easily moulded upon the skin to be wiped away like "putty." If men were sensible and rational, they would know to ignore Roper's stories, particularly because this correspondent taps into well-developed racial and cultural narratives Thomas Carlyle would later exploit regarding the Caribbean. Carlyle wrote that black people were governed by idleness and carnal passions, and it was the duty of white men to force them to work. A servile condition was, in other words, their rightful place (Goldberg 2000, 206-207; Wood 2002, 355-370). Compared to the white working classes, then, black people in America and in the Caribbean were imposters who sought to manipulate white philanthropic audiences for their own monetary gain.

The acerbic criticism he received in all three locations also represents Roper's refusal to surrender to the potential fetishization of his corporeal self. By refusing to

show his scars as "proof" of slavery's violence, he points to his written and oral testimony as evidence instead. Although the newspaper correspondents revealed antislavery principles to an extent, these existed alongside racial stereotypes which they invested in once Roper's testimony was deemed outside the limits of possibility. His story was meaningless without some form of white authentication, or – better yet – a visual confirmation of his scars. The correspondents' attempts to seize power and exert their own desires over Roper's corporeal self was met with a solid refusal to do their bidding.

Ultimately, all three articles from the Irish, English and Welsh press highlight how white supremacy operated across national boundaries to deliberately suppress Roper's testimony. *The North Wales Chronicle*'s remark that black people were "an obstinate, lazy and intractable race" was clearly part of a white supremacist narrative that was echoed by correspondents across the British Isles. Roper had duped the white public into feeling charitable towards black people, although they neither deserved nor needed it. Similarly, as two of the newspaper articles assert, the white working classes of Britain suffered far worse than enslaved Africans, who were so innately inferior that slavery was the best institution for them. All three articles reflect national and religious identities, and are striking examples of how white individuals reshaped and manipulated enslaved testimony. The newspaper coverage points to white antislavery politics where black testimony was carefully reframed for suitable and plausible narratives: Roper's refusal to edit his experience, together with a lack of abolitionist networks, affected his ability to defend his stories in such a public space. Despite this racist climate, Roper refused to be silenced. Throughout his lecturing career, he continued to confront white people who deemed his testimony to be

deceitful and refused to stop educating the transatlantic public on the true nature of American slavery.

"I would give him 100 lashes without stopping": Roper's performative resistance to white critics

Roper's performances in Britain have largely been placed on the periphery of scholarship, but some writers have acknowledged his challenges to white supremacy, particularly in conjunction with his *Narrative*. Jennifer Putzi argues that Roper offered "his own body up as text" to represent the brutality of slavery, regardless of his audience's reluctance to accept that brutality (2002, 186). The exhibition of his scars and strong denunciations of violence indicated that he was willing to visually show slavery's horrors but only in combination with his fiery rhetoric against it. Roper was reclaiming the scarred back from abolitionist narratives and reframing it to place more importance on the black voice (Putzi 2002, 186-188). Similarly, Martha J. Cutter argues that "formerly enslaved narrators struggled to script messages onto the tortured body not only of pain but also of modes of agency and voice, to move from being contained within the corporeal and silent realm (as an object that was seen) [to] the verbal and spoken one" (2014, 371). Roper's *Narrative* in particular "depicts a form of agency and subjectivity that moves beyond the master's system of representation" and challenges "a schema in which the enslaved body is reduced to a mere victim of torture" (373-374). Roper's body was used to "bear testimony to truth" and, through his *Narrative*, he turned "this experience into language" and as a result "*surmounted* this torture" (375). Extending Putzi's and Cutter's seminal analyses of Roper's techniques, in this section I will discuss how he used three performative

tactics on the British stage to challenge audience misconceptions about his stories of slavery.

Roper's *Narrative* sold thousands of copies in Britain, and in part paid for his exhausting lecturing tours. Aside from a source of income, his literary work was designed to educate British audiences and ensure his voice was heard, and this purpose as an educational tool led Roper to exhibit an extraordinary form of resistance to a commercial salesman who sold whips and chains. In a speech in Leicester in 1838, Roper recounted how he had passed a shop with such weapons of torture in the window and entered to enquire about them. The shopkeeper informed him they were being sold to America, and Roper immediately "gave him a copy of my book, and told him if he read it I hoped he would never make such irons again" (*Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties* 1838, 2). Roper's radical and unique performative act of placing the book into the clerk's hands was designed to prevent future commercial sales of torture implements and their use in America. He used his voice, actions and literary work to try and shame the shopkeeper into removing the items. His confrontational tactics may have alienated the shopkeeper (Roper does not record his response), but ultimately this did not matter. Roper intervened in traditional white spaces to insert his own testimony: regardless of the risks involved, and the uncertain outcomes, any black performative response to the white supremacist schema was a radical act representative of a larger black transatlantic protest tradition.

In expecting the shopkeeper to immediately stop the sale of whips and chains once his *Narrative* is read, Roper exploits sentimentalism and the concept that one would read something and take action as a consequence of deliverance from ignorance. Once an individual read about slavery or gazed at the illustrations in

Roper's *Narrative*, they would do anything to aid in its destruction. Fifty years before, Olaudah Equiano had argued that only those involved in the slave trade itself could read his *Narrative* without invoking feeling or action. Abolitionists relied on audience indignation to provoke support for the antislavery cause, and used emotion and moral suasion to do it (Woods 2015, 675-677).

Roper's second form of resistance concerns his deliberate refusal to edit his own testimony. In New Ross, Wexford, Roper lectured about slavery and specifically mentioned the cruelty of Methodist and Baptist slaveholders. According to the local press, he "represented them as cruel, canting, hypocrites" and "taunted those who would vindicate them in private, and would not publicly contradict his statements" (*Wexford Conservative* 1838). One local minister demanded proof, since Roper's account "did not bear the appearance of truth," and another dismissed his "unauthenticated statements." One of the ministers on the platform warned Roper to tone down his language and apologize for his comments towards the Methodist Church, but instead he "endeavoured to excite the feelings of the assembly, by speaking with great warmth, of his mother being held in Slavery by a Methodist" (*Wexford Conservative* 1838). Faced with numerous audience members who demanded his apology, Roper refused to concede on the truth and supported his own testimony with conclusive evidence. Although this bold resistance invited the criticism quoted earlier, Roper risked his reputation as a lecturer and denied attempts to downplay the brutal nature of slavery. This episode clearly demonstrates the dangers that were involved for black abolitionists who wished to defy white supremacist narratives and the strict confines of white antislavery politics. Roper refused to acquiesce in white demands, which jeopardized long-lasting or potential abolitionist networks.

In perhaps the most radical technique, when Roper was faced with numerous sceptics who openly challenged his stories of torture he threatened to use those same weapons of torture on audience members. Instead of relying on white testimonials, Roper wanted to use his own strategies to convince Britons of slavery's reality. Frances Smith Foster does not refer to Roper's lectures in Britain, but argues that in order to achieve their political aims or to conduct a successful antislavery meeting, formerly enslaved individuals often had to employ subtle language so as not to challenge white superiority and "avoid unnecessarily antagonizing their audience" (1979, 13). Despite shrouding his performative strategy in humour, Roper was probably one of the few African Americans who *deliberately* antagonized his audience. For example, in 1838, he stated:

> The first or second time that I attempted to speak in public, about three months ago, when I was exhibiting this whip, a gentleman (who I afterwards found a pro-slavery man) got up, and said that he did not believe the statement. He said that a person, after he had given one lash, would have to rest five minutes. I said that I was not able to argue with him, but, having been a driver, if he would walk out into the street, I would give him 100 lashes without stopping. (*Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties* 1838, 2)

It is difficult to ascertain whether Roper meant this in jest, which highlights one problem of understanding black performance through the white lens of Victorian print culture. Using such dangerous language was complex because audience reaction could not be predicted. In another account of this performative technique in Bradford, the correspondent records the audience laughing in response, indicating Roper was being deliberately subversive to challenge white racism through comedy (*The Bradford Observer* 1840, 3). Glenda Carpio argues that African Americans challenged racism "with a rich tradition of humour" which undermined white

oppression (2008, 4). She charts black humour and its usage from the plantation and beyond, and argues that "until well into the twentieth century it had to be cloaked in secrecy less it be read as transgressive and punished by violence" (4-5). As a black man whipping a white man, Roper's humour had minstrelesque connotations, but his extensive trauma at the hands of his slaveowners and the constant denial of slavery's violence mean this incident cannot be read as mere humour.

Conclusion

Roper's commitment to relaying such brutality can be summarized as early as 1838, when, during one speech, he declared, "you have heard the slave-holders' story 250 years ago. Now, I think it is time for the slaves to speak" (*Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties* 1838, 2). Roper was the first to make such a bold statement: he would always tell the truth of his experience, however harsh it sounded to white Victorians. Part of that truth was the brutal torture enacted upon him, as well as what he had witnessed himself. Impatient and reluctant to listen to the lies of white slaveholders, Roper placed his testimony above white critics since they had continued to ridicule, destroy or suppress the black voice. When Roper returned to British soil in 1855, he continued to insist that slavery was an abhorrent evil and reminded British audiences that, despite the rise of popular abolition, he had been a lone voice speaking the truth about slavery years before:

> When he lectured on his previous visit to England, there were many people who did not believe the statements he then made, with regard to the cruelties inflicted upon slaves, and the oppressions they were compelled to submit to; but since that time "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and a thousand other witnesses had added their testimony to the truth of his assertions. (*Hereford Times* 1855, 9)

Alluding to the criticism he received in the British press, Roper argued that although Stowe's novel, together with the transatlantic journeys of other black activists, had finally opened the public's eyes, he was among the first to depict the violence of slavery. Now British audiences had awakened to its evils, and he implied the testimony from "other witnesses" added weight to what he had always maintained. With an air of vindication, he reminded Britons of his testimony before abolition became fashionable. Roper did not present the novel as the pinnacle of evidence against slavery, particularly in relation to violence; rather, his own black testimony was that instead.

References

The Aberdeen Journal. 1846. July 8, 3.

Andrews, William L. 1986. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography 1760-1865.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Bell, Richard. 2012. "Slave Suicide, Abolition and the Problem of Resistance." *Slavery & Abolition* 33 (4): 525-549.

Blackett, R. J. M. 1983. *Building an Antislavery Wall*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

The Bradford Observer. 1836. July 28, 6.

The Bradford Observer. 1840. March 12, 3.

Burke, Ronald K. 1996. *Frederick Douglass: Crusading Orator for Human Rights.* New York: Garland Publishing.

Caledonian Mercury. 1846. May 11, 3.

Carey, Brycchan. 2005. *British Abolitionism and Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment and Slavery 1760-1807.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Carpio, Glenda. 2008. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cutter, Martha J. 2014. "Revising Torture: Moses Roper and the Visual Rhetoric of the Slave's Body in the Transatlantic Abolition Movement." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 60 (3): 371-411.

Cutter, Martha J. 2017. *The Illustrated Slave: Empathy, Graphic Narrative, and the Visual Culture of the Transatlantic Abolition Movement 1800-1852*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

DeLombard, Jeanne. 2001. "'Eye-witness to the Cruelty': Southern Violence and Northern Testimony in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*." *American Literature* 73 (2): 245-275.

Dungey, Azie Mira. 2013. *Ask A Slave Web Series*. "Episode 3: You Can't Make This Stuff Up." September. http://www.askaslave.com/season-one.html.

Fisch, Audrey. 2000. *American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foster, Frances Smith. 1979. *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Frenck, Moses. 28 July 2016. "Slavery Wasn't Really That Bad for Some Slaves, Says Fox News' O'Reilly." *DiversityInc.* http://www.diversityinc.com/news/slavery-wasnt-really-bad-slaves-says-fox-news-oreilly/.

Goldberg David Theo. 2000. "Liberalism's Limits: Carlyle and Mill on 'The Negro Question.'" *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 22 (2): 203-216.

Halttunen, Karen. 1995. “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture.” *The American Historical Review* 100 (2): 303-334.

Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian. 1839. July 6 and 13, 2.

Hartman, Sadiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hereford Times. 1855. August 4, 9.

Jackson, Cassandra. 2011. *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body.* New York: Routledge.

Jackson, John Andrew. 1862. *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina.* London: Passmore & Alabaster.

Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties. 1838. May 19, 2.

Levecq, Christine. 2008. *Slavery and Sentiment: The Politics of Feeling in Black Atlantic Antislavery Writing 1770-1850.* Lebanon: University of New Hampshire Press.

McBride, Dwight A. 2001. *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony.* New York: New York University Press.

Nathans, Heather. 2009. *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-1861.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

North Wales Chronicle. 1841. November 9, 3.

Nottingham Review. 1851. April 4, 3.

Putzi, Jennifer. 2002. “‘The Skin of an American Slave’: African American Manhood and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century Abolitionist Literature.” *Studies in American Fiction* 30 (2): 182-206.

Ripley, Peter, ed. 1985. *The Black Abolitionist Papers: The British Isles, 1830-1865*. Vol. 1. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Roper, Moses. 1838. *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery.* Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn.

Sekora, John. 1987. "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative." *Callaloo* 32: 482-515.

The Sheffield Independent and Yorkshire and Derbyshire Advertiser. 1838. April 21, 3.

Walker, Paul. 2011. "Moses Roper: African American Baptist, Anti-Slavery Lecturer and Birmingham Nonconformity." *Baptist Quarterly* 44 (2): 99-114.

Weld, Theodore Dwight. 1839. *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*. New York: Anti-Slavery Society / DocSouth Books. http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/weld/weld.html.

Wexford Conservative. 1838. October 6, 3.

Wood, Marcus. 2000. *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Wood, Marcus. 2002. *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Woods, Michael E. 2015. "A Theory of Moral Outrage: Indignation and Eighteenth-Century British Abolitionism." *Slavery & Abolition* 36 (4): 662-683.